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ABSTRACT

The rapidity with which information processing equipment is changing has necessitated the development of business and office occupations curricula with a more generalized approach to the technology of information processing. Educational planners should use a systems approach rather than the more traditional components approach to develop curricula to provide (1) a broad understanding of business activities, (2) the competencies necessary to perform information processing tasks, (3) an understanding of the underlying business principles and processes that are common to different types of organizations using different technologies, and (4) the personal qualities necessary for successful adjustment to the changing demands of society and employment in business. Examining and validating bodies should redesign business and office curricula to include an initial intensive period of study and should break down existing subject barriers and integrate the subject matter around the types of tasks that students will encounter in different business contexts. College teachers must obtain a sound knowledge of microelectronics applications coupled with an understanding of the applications of communication and numeracy skills within their particular business specialty and should adopt a team approach to instructional delivery. (A table enumerating information processing tasks needed by workers in modern offices along with relevant elements of information processing and potential applications of information technology is appended.) (MN)

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A Modern Curriculum for Office Employment: a Framework for Coping with Technological Change

An FEU View

July 1985

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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FURTHER EDUCATION UNIT

Elizabeth House York Road London SE1 7PH Telephone 01 934 9000

Chairman J G Owen CBE

Chief Officer Jack Mansell MEd CEng FIEE FBCS MInstM

Chief Education Officers
Principals of FHE Establishments
Secretaries of Regional and FE
Examining Bodies
Press and other Interested
Institutions / Individuals

Dear Sir / Madam

A MODERN CURRICULUM FOR OFFICE EMPLOYMENT – A FRAMEWORK FOR COPING WITH TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

This pamphlet carries forward the essential message that was contained in *Towards the Electronic Office**: because of the increasing use of new technology in offices, we need to adopt a different approach to our vocational curricula for office occupations.

What is suggested is an office curriculum based on *information handling*, based on five elements: assessing, capturing, structuring, retrieving and disseminating. Appendix 1 shows how these elements relate to many of the conventional office tasks, and remain capable of relating to them when transformed by the new technology. Thus a stable curricular framework capable of relating to both 'old' and 'new' skills is created.

The document briefly discusses alternative approaches to the problem of relating vocational courses to modern office technology and concludes that the 'bolting-on' of additional subjects will probably no longer suffice.

Examining and validating bodies, are urged to appraise their schemes (and examinations) in the light of the suggestions put forward. College managers and teachers are urged to look again at the way in which they organise and deliver their office curricula.

The FEU is indebted to a number of colleagues listed in Appendix 2, for their persistence in pursuing a solution to what is becoming a serious problem of how to modify a conventional curriculum so that it can cope with new technology.

With the increasing application of IT, many of our existing curricula are not able to facilitate the permeation of IT into syllabus topics. Radical new structures may be required, and not only in business education. This is a modest start in one area. If it is a radical solution, then it is necessary. The FEU will watch with interest the extent to which curriculum designers and teachers relate to it.

Yours faithfully

Jack Mansell

JACK MANSELL
Chief Officer

* *Towards the Electronic Office* FEU Occasional Paper Sept 1983

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A Common Concern

1. There is a common concern to raise standards of education and training. In order to do so, we need to be clear about the types and levels of ability which we seek to develop in students. Courses in Business and Office Studies must take account of the need to equip students for employment in a broad range of occupations in industry, commerce and public administration. The MSC New Training Initiative, endorsed by a Government White Paper, set objectives for the modernisation of occupational training across all sectors of employment. FEU has argued* for a productive partnership between education and training to achieve these objectives - a partnership committed to a set of aims which cover the development of competence for present (or possible) employment together with a sound basis for future retraining; understanding of the industrial, social and economic context; preparation for change and provision for individual development and progression. The fulfilment of these aims will require the adoption of concepts of competence which are related to the changing needs of society and are not unduly restrictive. In some cases this may require different definitions of standards; in most cases it should mean higher standards.

A Systems Approach

2. A major feature of the changing nature of business is the impact of information technology. The proliferation of cheap but increasingly powerful microprocessors has brought the vast majority of business occupations into direct contact with computer-based systems. The FEU Occasional Paper Towards the Electronic Office (September 1983) reviewed the curricular implications of new office technology as they appeared in 1982. The publication described the growing awareness and use of information technology by industry and commerce and the ways in which the training and education systems were reacting to this rapidly changing situation. It concluded that there was too little movement towards a curriculum capable of giving a more

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* Towards a Competence-Based System. August 1984.

generalised approach to this expanding technology. It further suggested that as new and more powerful electronic equipment is increasingly introduced into offices, more attention should be paid in education to the understanding of the processes being served by this equipment, so that when the equipment changes, more fundamental skills associated with information processing and interpretation, remain useful. This, it was emphasised, requires a systems rather than a components approach. This document attempts to describe the main implications of a systems approach for the curricula which affect the large numbers of students at all levels who are employed, or will seek employment, in an office environment.

A Curriculum for Office Employment

3. A basic curriculum for vocational education for the office requires a broad set of aims if it is to be adaptable to technological change. It should enable students to:

a) develop a broad understanding of business* activities, the structure and functions of business and institutions, and their inter-relationships:

   i) from the point of view of the business organisation within its overall environment;
   ii) as a system of integrated activities;
   iii) as a dynamic activity in which one of the major elements of change is technology;

b) develop the competences necessary for the performance of information processing tasks;

c) understand and apply the underlying business principles and processes which are common to different types of organisation employing different technologies;

d) develop competences which are common to a wide range of office occupations through their application to specific business contexts, and acquire a foundation onto which specialist competences can be built;

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* 'business' is used throughout in its broadest sense to incorporate industry, commerce and public administration.

e) develop personal qualities which will assist them to adjust to the changing demands of society and of employment in business.

Many curricula on offer incorporate some of these aims; none so far incorporate all of these aims.

Competences in the Office

4. The definition of desirable learning outcomes from a modern curriculum for education for the office involves a detailed analysis of the competences required across a wide range of occupations, covering many different levels of organisational responsibility. The structure and content of Business and Office Studies courses need to be based more firmly on the typical tasks carried out in the environment of the modern office. Technological change in the office has brought about an increasing convergence of computing, administrative and secretarial skills, which were previously much more discrete. Some progress has already been made within FE which reflects these changes, with the growth of 'grouped courses' which emphasise interdisciplinary studies, but further advances are necessary. In particular there needs to be a recognition that many tasks in the modern business world require a combination of communication skills, numeracy skills and a knowledge of microelectronic applications, as well as competence in specific business applications such as insurance, purchasing, accounting, etc. Currently, the teaching and learning of these skills in separate subject 'boxes' often prevents students from learning to synthesise them effectively at work.

Common Competences

5. Common areas of competence are concerned with business processes, which are common to different contexts. The link between common process skills and specialist business knowledge will vary according to employment requirements. For clerks, secretaries and office supervisors/managers, essentially similar competences are involved in much of their work, whatever organisational type or business sector is involved. Accountants, marketing managers and the like, obviously require certain

competences which are specific to their function. Nonetheless, many similar processes are used by both groups particularly in the way in which they employ computer-based technology. For example, a major task of office workers at all levels of business, commerce and public administration is that of dealing with information in order to achieve organisational objectives. Five elements of information processing can be identified as a useful analytical basis from which essential competences may be derived:

assessing	- the evaluation of the need for information, its relevance and fitness for purpose;
capturing	- the gathering, selection, recording and storing of information;
structuring	- the manipulation and conversion of information from one form to another within the system;
retrieving	- the obtaining and presentation of information from record;
disseminating	- the communication of information to others.

These elements are not necessarily sequential : a specific task may, for instance, commence with an evaluation of the need for particular information (assessing) and continue through obtaining relevant information from records (retrieving), merging that information with other data and performing calculations upon it (structuring), evaluating the relevance of the results with regard to overall objectives (assessing) and finally storing the results (capturing). The 'assessing' element tends to be required at each stage of an information processing task - from the initial evaluation of the need for information, via the choice of the particular means of performing the task and the selection of appropriate technology, to the evaluation of the relevance and fitness for purpose of its outcomes.

Basic Principles and Processes

6. These five elements of information handling can be used as a useful framework for identifying and categorising the principles and processes which are basic to work in the office, irrespective of the technology which is used. It will be necessary for

students/trainees to develop skills and knowledge directly related to particular technologies, but these need to be set firmly in the context of common principles and processes if there is to be an easy adaptability to new techniques. Keyboarding skills, for example, are likely to become less crucial to the efficient use of computers with the availability of more user-friendly devices for input, manipulation and retrieval of data, such as touch-sensitive screens, laser pens, voice synthesisers and the like. The essential transferable learning for students in this context is therefore connected with the basic principles and processes of commanding and communicating with a computer, rather than a restricted competence in one specific application. There is an increasing questioning as to why students should learn to program in a business studies course (as opposed to specialist courses in computing) on the grounds that the development of microcomputers and supporting software has meant that programming ability is not generally required in many business occupations. Rather we need to recognise the abilities connected with the selection, maintenance and adaptation of existing software in order to support computerised business systems.

7. Appendix 1 to this document sets out a few examples of the wide range of tasks which are commonly undertaken in offices which involve the application of basic information processing principles and processes, and to which microelectronic technology can readily be applied. It will be seen that the tasks cover a range of the traditional component subject areas of business and office studies and are related to a variety of different ability levels. Nonetheless, a number of the same basic information processing competences are connected with each task. When computers and word processors are used in conjunction with such tasks, many similar procedures are, therefore, involved.

Process Skills and the Business Studies Curriculum

8. Many of the competences which are central to the types of task illustrated in Appendix 1 are covered, actually or potentially, within existing Business and Office Studies courses. However, their achievement by students is more often an incidental spin-off from work set in conjunction with traditional

subject specialisms. It is less frequently the outcome of a coherent programme aimed at identifying and developing those common process skills which facilitate the ability to operate efficiently in a wide variety of business contexts. Failure to give formal recognition to such skills can mean in practice that they have low status in the eyes of teachers and students, that there is confusion over standards, and that duplication of effort occurs (which is especially wasteful in the area of scarce information technology resources).

IT in the Business Studies Curriculum - Alternative Approaches

9. Learning which is relevant to the principles and processes of office employment may require changes in the ways in which new technology is introduced into business and office studies curricula, i.e:

i) as an essential induction to a course: it has been argued that basic awareness and competence in information technology can be developed most beneficially via an intensive period of study at the commencement of a course. This then allows students to build more easily on this foundation of knowledge and skills when the applications of information technology in different business contexts are dealt with.

ii) as a catalyst for integration: this involves breaking down existing subject barriers and integrating the curriculum around the needs of the type of task which students will encounter in the modern office. Even at the basic level, many tasks in the modern office require a combination of the knowledge and skills which may, for example, currently be developed principally in separate course units with titles such as communication, numeracy, computing, word processing, office practice and commerce.

A more radical approach is required if students are to be prepared more thoroughly to meet the demands of these tasks and this may be difficult to achieve within the constraints of some existing syllabuses and course structures. More experience is needed of effective strategies for integrating IT across the curriculum in a coherent manner. We need to exploit more fully

the opportunities presented by microcomputers and their associated software to handle large volumes of complex data. This capability enables students to apply business principles using realistic information : there is no longer the same need to simplify data in order to reduce the amount and difficulty of the calculations undertaken by the student. This in turn opens up the possibility of exploring the answers to 'what if?' questions concerning real business decision-making with students of ability bands lower than was the case before, and presents a further challenge to curriculum designers.

Currently, however, the following approaches are more typical :

iii) as a modernisation of each subject area within courses : the commercial application of information technology to different business functions has inevitably placed demands on vocational courses to prepare students accordingly. Likewise, the application of computer-based technology to aid learning has its attractions for some teachers across all subject areas. So far the main impact in business studies courses is in the subjects most affected by the commercial applications of information technology, such as accounting and secretarial studies. The dangers of this approach are that it can lead to a piecemeal and unco-ordinated development of information technology across the curriculum, with insufficient attention being given to transferable principles and processes. This approach is more justifiable for mature students who require updating so that they can obtain a practical understanding of the application of information technology within their own professional area.

iv) as an additional subject : this document argues that the 'bolt-on' approach is inappropriate as a means of enabling students to develop a practical understanding of the wide range of business applications involving information technology. Notwithstanding the pace of technological change and the relative scarcity of staff expertise, hardware and software, the continuation of this strategy of dealing with change at the basic levels is proving inadequate. It may be desirable in the case of specialist options for students who, for example, choose to study computing in greater depth, perhaps with a view to employment in the computing profession. For the majority of business studies

students/trainees, however, it has significant potential drawbacks in isolating information technology from its applications across the rest of the curriculum. It suggests to students/trainees (and their employers) that the role of information technology in business is akin to that of a specialist function, rather than a set of tools which must be applied in a whole range of occupations, by employees who do not regard themselves as computing professionals. It can also lead to the elevation of specific computing knowledge in the minds of students as having greater value than an understanding of the business systems which this knowledge in practice supports.

Implications for Examining and Validating Bodies

10. Teachers will be helped if the examining and validating bodies redesign business and office studies courses so that information processing, using modern technology, becomes an underlying theme of the curriculum, as opposed to a 'bolt on' option. Some moves have already been made in this direction, but it is still possible in many business studies courses for students to have little or no exposure to the principles and techniques of information processing unless they choose to undertake a relevant specialist option. Assessment policies also need review if the development of process skills within the curriculum is to be encouraged. A heavy emphasis on formal terminal examinations is unlikely to encourage the development of the broad range of skills involved because of the limitations on relevance and validity imposed by this form of assessment. It is becoming artificial to assess competence for business by means of formal written tests, when the tasks to which these competences apply are increasingly likely to be performed at computer work-stations.

Implications for College Managers and Teachers

11. Teachers can themselves achieve a great deal, irrespective of course design, by identifying competences which apply across the curriculum, common approaches and agreed standards. In practical terms this means that all teachers require a sound knowledge of microelectronic applications coupled with an understanding of the applications of communication and numeracy

skills within their particular business specialism. It also means that teachers should adopt a co-operative team approach in order to deliver the curriculum in a more co-ordinated manner. There needs to be an emphasis on providing students with appropriate access to information technology by means of assignments and projects which, amongst other things, require the use of a computer as a problem-solving tool. The timetabling of computer rooms throughout the day for formal classes may reduce the scope for individual student assignment work of this type. Computers now represent primary aids of learning which require sufficiently open access, in the same say as library facilities.

Further Guidance

12. A number of FEU publications provide advice and support to teaching staff anxious to develop information technology applications within the curriculum. Computer Literacy (1983) should assist associated programmes of staff development across departments, as well as acting as a basis for student support material. Materials have also been published to support a 20 hour staff development course, FE Staff Development in the Use of Microcomputers*, a significant element of which is illustrated via business studies applications. Finally, Computers in Business Education - a Practical Guide** reviews ways in which lecturers might enrich their courses in the area of information technology, with particular emphasis on the evaluation, selection and use of software.

Further FEU Developments and Feedback

13. FEU will continue to review the need for guidance on the development of curricula more appropriate to the needs of office employment. Support is being given to a number of conferences and workshops. It is also likely that one or more research

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* Available from PAVIC Productions, Sheffield Polytechnic, 37 Bromgrove Road, Sheffield, S10 2BP.

**Computers in Business Education : a Practical Guide, Longman for FEU, 1985.

projects will be funded in order to identify more specifically the implications of student learning activities relevant to the modern office for the structure, content and implementation of related courses. In the meantime FEU will be pleased to receive comments on this document : views are sought in particular on the priorities for further guidance on curriculum development in this area, as well as information on examples of successful innovatory approaches. Responses should be addressed to Peter Davies, Room 6/55, Elizabeth House, York Road, London SE1 7PH.

Appendix 1: Information Processing Tasks in the Office

The first column in the table which follows illustrates just a few examples of the types of task commonly undertaken in the office. The tasks span a range of functional areas, and of the levels of competence required to undertake them. A number of the tasks may, in practice, commonly be split between individuals - for example, a decision to establish a mailing list, and the determination of its scope, will usually be taken at managerial level. The initial inputting of details onto a word processor, and the subsequent maintenance and use of the mailing list are likely to be carried out at operator level.

The tasks all involve a number of the basic elements of information processing, as indicated in the middle column. In the case of customer reservations, the process commences with an identification of customer requirements (assessing) and then proceeds via the recording and storing of particular details necessary to make the reservation (capturing), updating the records accordingly (structuring) and confirming the reservation to the customer (disseminating).

All the tasks illustrated can be performed in a variety of ways, and with varying degrees of technological support. Modern information technology provides opportunities for improving the efficiency with which each task can be undertaken (as indicated in the last column) and students need to be made aware of these applications. It remains important, however for students to learn about alternative approaches, including manual systems which will still be appropriate in many cases where the volume and complexity of data being handled is insufficent to justify a computerised system. The elements of information processing provide a common framework within which students can more easily come to terms with alternative approaches, and with continuing changes in technology.

Task	Relevant Elements of Information Processing	Potential Application of Information Technology
Personnel recruitment employment, starters and leavers. Wage rates and instructions	Assessing, Capturing, Disseminating	Using word processing facilities - text editing, form letters and merge printing
Personnel Records	Capturing, Structuring, Retrieving, Disseminating	Use of database facilities. Files, structure and reports
Purchasing and Supply - requests for quotations. Purchase orders.	Capturing, Structuring, Disseminating	Word processing - form letters and merge printing. Interactive access to supplier information systems
Purchasing and Supply - stock levels and stock re-orders	Assessing, Retrieving, Structuring, Disseminating	Use of database. Stock interrogation. Files structure and reports
Purchase Ledger - entry of transactions. Accounting for value and stock records.	Capturing, Structuring, Retrieving	Accounting software - entries, control and reconciliation
Purchase Ledger - interrogation of supplier records. Management information.	Assessing, Structuring, Disseminating	Accounting software - analysis and production of results
Stock Records - preparation of forecasts. Stock levels, re-order levels.	Assessing, Retrieving, Disseminating	Use of database - forecasting, management reports

Task	Relevant Elements of Information Processing	Potential Application of Information Technology
Stock Records - preparation of budgets	Assessing, Structuring Disseminating	Spreadsheet software- use of accounting data
Payroll - entry of employee records. Preparation of weekly/ monthly payroll data.	Capturing, Structuring	Payroll software - control and reconciliation
Payroll - management reports and analysis	Assessing, Structuring, Retrieving, Disseminating	Payroll software - production of reports
Payroll - administration	Assessing, Disseminating	Word processing - letters and reports
Payroll - forecasts and budgets	All	Database/spreadsheets for interrogation and preparation of budget
Sales Ledger - entry of transactions. Accounting for value and stock records.	Capturing, Structuring	Accounting software- entries, control and reconciliation
Sales Ledger - interrogation of customer records Management information.	Capturing, Structuring, Retrieving, Disseminating	Accounting software - analysis and printing of results
Sales Administration - receipt of customer order, acknowledgement. Internal/external documentation.	Capturing, Structuring, Disseminating	Using word processing for form letters and merge printing

Task	Relevant Elements of Information Processing	Potential Application of Information Technology
Sales Administration - quotations - customer enquiries.	Capturing, Structuring Disseminating	Word processing - text creation, editing and printing
Sales Administration- forecasting sales from past data	Assessing, Retrieving, Structuring, Disseminating	Use of database
Sales Administration - results analysis - management information.	Assessing, Structuring, Disseminating	Use of spreadsheet and database
Sales Administration - Stock interrogation	Assessing, Retrieving, Disseminating	Accounting and stock control software
Mailing Lists - creating, editing and updating.	Assessing, Capturing, Structuring, Retrieving	Use of word processing facilities
Public databases - gathering relevant information	Assessing, Retrieving, Disseminating	Viewdata
Reservation Systems - enquiries and booking.	Assessing, Capturing, Structuring, Disseminating	On-line computer systems
Receiving visitors and obtaining security clearance	All	Accessing computer based records
Responding to customer enquiries	All	Accessing database for current information
Compiling written communications	All	Using library of standard documents or paragraphs stored on wp system

Task	Relevant Elements of Information Processing	Potential Application of Information Technology
Revising existing documents	Capturing, Structuring, Retrieving	Using text processing facilities
Sending and receiving written communications	All	Using electronic mail facilities and accessing Telecom services
Maintaining a filing system	Assessing, Capturing, Structuring, Retrieving	Using storage and retrieval facilties, housekeeping routines
Ensuring security and privacy of information	Assessing, Capturing, Structuring	Using passwords, back-up procedures, etc.
Classifying and listing records (eg student names by classes, sales leads by areas, etc.)	Assessing, Structuring, Retrieving	Using sort facilities to select and list
Updating lists (eg internal telephone index)	Assessing, Capturing, Structuring, Retrieving	Using text revision and sort facilities
Making travel arrangements	Assessing, Capturing, Structuring, Retrieving	Accessing external databases, using interactive reservation system
Presenting information in graphical form	Capturing, Structuring, Retrieving	Using computer graphics facilities

Appendix 2: **List of Contributors**

Ms C Disney	Computer Consultant
T. Duley	Abingdon College of Further Education
Mrs. C E Duncan	Lewes Technical College
Ms L McDonald	Council for Educational Technology
J Martin	Pitman Examinations Institute
R Mildon, HMI	Department of Education and Science
Dr R Millington	Manpower Services Commission
P Neate	City and Guilds of London Institute
Mrs M Rees Boughton	Royal Society of Arts Examinations Board
Mrs E Roberts	Joint Examining Board for Teachers Diplomas
Miss P Servant	Royal Society of Arts Examinations Board
Mrs J Stainton-Skinn	London Chamber of Commerce and Industry
J Stephenson	Lancashire County Council
P Tarplett	Business and Technician Education Council
J D Thomas, HMI	Department of Education and Science
Mrs D Wallis	West Bromwich College of Commerce and Technology
A C Wise	Abingdon College of Further Education
P Davies	Further Education Unit

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Objectives

The objectives for which ***The Further Education Unit (FEU)*** *is established are to promote, encourage and develop the efficient provision of further education in the United Kingdom and for that purpose:*
a) to review and evaluate the range of existing further education curricula and programmes and to identify overlap, duplication, deficiencies and inconsistencies therein;
b) to determine priorities for action to improve the provision of further education and to make recommendations as to how such improvement can be effected;
c) to carry out studies in further education and to support investigations of and experimentation in, and the development of further education curricula and to contribute to and assist in the evaluation of initiatives in further education;
d) to disseminate and publish information and to assist in the dissemination and publication of information about recommendations for and experiments and developments in further education.

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